

The book cover features a romantic illustration of a man and a woman. The woman has long, flowing white hair and is wearing a light purple, strapless, floor-length gown. She is looking up at the man with a soft expression. The man has dark, wavy hair and is wearing a yellow collar. He is embracing her from behind, with his hands resting on her chest. The background is a dark, moody sky with a large, reddish-brown moon. In the upper left corner, there is a silhouette of a castle with a string of yellow stars trailing upwards. The title 'Claimed' is written in a large, stylized, red font with a white outline and a drop shadow effect. The author's name 'Brenna Lyons' is written in a similar font at the bottom right.

# Claimed

Brenna

Lyons

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Claimed: König Mate  
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**Claimed: König Mate**  
**A Night Warriors Story**  
**By Brenna Lyons**

## ***Dedicated to...***

Loves that are just meant to be, like the one in my life.

Mikel shivered, his cock rising at her invitation. "You're asking me to touch you?" he managed.

Holly smiled smugly. "If what you believe is true, shouldn't I feel it if you do?" she challenged.

He stretched out beside her, leaning up on his elbow so that he looked down on her. "It's more than that," he informed her. "You want me to kiss you."

She nodded, her eyes locked with his, breathless. "Yes."

## *Glossary of Warrior Terms:*

**Beast** Beasts are what humans erroneously refer to as vampires. The stories humans tell are obviously not correct, but you can't expect a human to get everything right.

**Blutjagd** The "blood hunt." Warriors crave battle with the beasts, as the beasts crave blood. Warriors are tied to beasts in that they sense many of the beasts' special powers. A Warrior can feel the use of coercion, feeding, and other controls of humans. They also feel other Warriors engaged in Blutjagd, the death of beasts and Warriors in their range, and the presence of nearby beasts who are not ghosted.

**Elder** One of the original beasts, the stone stealers who were damned for their crimes against the stone and the Warriors. The elders are gifted with powers other beasts are not, including the ability to reproduce with a *Blutjagdfrau*, the ability to turn other beasts, and the inability to be killed by anyone but a Warrior.

**Ende Spiel** The point in printing when a Warrior must either seal printing or go insane. A Warrior who feels printing may not progress should break printing long before this point.

**Printing** Like imprinting, a Warrior becomes tied to his mate for life. He cannot choose another if she is lost, cannot be unfaithful while she lives, and cannot

ever divorce or otherwise dissolve the union. A printed Warrior is the most stable of men unless his mate or children are endangered or lost. Then, he will suffer the printing madness and may have to be killed by his house. Likewise, a Warrior who breaks printing, even early printing, will suffer for it. A Warrior who breaks printing too close to Ende Spiel will face the madness.

**Warriors** Also called Cursed Warriors or Sons of the Stone. The Warriors were an ancient race of protectors who spawned the beasts and now are driven to hunt their former brothers to extinction.

January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2028

Mikel of Crossbearer-König stared at the lady's belly in surprise, watching the purple and blue sparkles dancing on the surface of her shirt in fascination. *She* was in there, the one who would come to him when he was a man.

He reached for her mind, desperate to know her before her parents took her far away from him. She'd be half a world away, across the ocean that he knew no one could see the end of.

She was comfortable, snug in her watery home on the plane of her mother's lush womb. She was strong, courageous, the perfect mate for a König.

He needed a name for her. Though Mikel knew her parents were of the Smith family, it wasn't enough information for him. It wasn't enough to think of her as *she*. Mikel searched the lady's mind frantically, locking on the name hidden there. *Perfect!*

He rushed to her and pressed a kiss to her belly, speaking with his mind to his young mate, telling her about the day she would join him in Cross range.

"How cute," the lady cried out in glee.

His mother started across the room, her shimmer



flickering in concern. "Mikel?" she asked. "What is it?"

He met her eyes, patting the lady's belly, smiling. "Baby," he announced. "My Holly."

The lady gasped, covering his hand with her own. "Oh, Patrick," she breathed. Her joy sent shards of white light through the green of her shimmer.

"What is it?" his mother asked again.

"Patrick just told me a few days ago, and..." She stopped, tears pooled in her eyes.

Mikel looked at her curiously. Was she upset that she carried his mate? She was crying, but the tears were ones of happiness. He sighed in relief.

The Warrior took over for her, drawing his attention from the lady. "If the baby was a girl, we planned to name her Holly."

Mikel looked up at him in surprise. Not that he knew the baby's name but at the edge of *Blutjagd* burning in his skin, his braid of red shimmer expanding and being fought back again.

He sighed at a flash of insight. The Warrior thought he was protecting his daughter. Mikel's proclamation of her as "my Holly" had been perceived as a threat. He struggled for the words to explain himself then ground his teeth in frustration. Mikel was aware of so much, but he was limited in expression, his two-year-old body hampering his ability to communicate the things he knew to be true.

*It doesn't matter*, he assured himself. Even if he could explain the connection between himself and Holly, her parents wouldn't believe him. Even if they did believe him, he wouldn't be a sealed Soldat der

Nacht for many years. Until then, it wasn't appropriate to ask permission to claim his mate.

He turned away, already missing her. Mikel took his mother's hand, casting one last look at Holly. It would be many years before he'd see her again. The Warrior's mind was full of plans, plans to keep her from him, but Mikel was a König. Nothing would deny him his proper mate. The stone would see to that.

September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2048

Patrick Smith slammed his hand down on the desk between himself and his uncle. "Being my house lord does not give you the right to demand this," he growled.

Vince rubbed his forehead. "I will forgive that outburst, but do not abuse my patience."

He nodded, fisting his hand in frustration.

"Sit down, Patrick."

He obeyed, abruptly wary. Something told him that König would get his way in the end, and he didn't like it.

"Now, need I remind you that you are required to obey the Königs?"

"Lord and Lady König," he grumbled.

Vince scowled at him. "You doubt that Talon and Jayde will issue the order if you refuse this invitation? That Erin will back it? That Hunter..."

"Invitation?" he snapped. "I am being *ordered* to turn my daughter over to—"

"It is nothing of the sort," he shouted. "König or not, Mikel knows the rules of sanction. He won't be forcing himself on Holly or even convincing her to

willingness. All he asks is that you bring her to Cross and consider a suit."

"And, if I do not choose to consider it?" he challenged.

Vince stared at him in seeming disbelief. "I really don't understand you, Patrick. Any other father would be glad to—"

"Would they? Would they, really? Why my daughter, Vince? Why Holly?"

"I can't say. They say Mikel sees inside of people's souls. They say he cannot be lied to. When he met you in Cross—"

"Do not remind me." Patrick managed a calm voice, though his heart pounded in near terror. The moment Mikel pronounced Holly as his own had haunted him for two decades. Had he ever doubted this day would come? All of his careful plans were laid to rest by one order from the house above all houses, and he would lose his daughter in the end.

His uncle sighed. "Go, Patrick. Stay as short a time as you like, but let him meet Holly. She is under no obligation to accept a suit. At her word, you can refuse."

He nodded, more at ease. "We won't be staying long," he vowed. He started to stand.

"Patrick?" Vince seemed abruptly grave.

"Yes?" His stomach clenched in a manner not unlike the sick feeling a Warrior experienced when a beast was feeding nearby. His senses warned of approaching danger.

"If Holly agrees to be courted—"

"I don't—"

"Remote, I know, but if she agrees, consider carefully before you refuse her. And, I wouldn't dissuade her before she goes. It might be deemed as dishonorable."

\* \* \* \*

Holly smiled, reaching her hand back to clasp her father's.

He chuckled, but it was a strained sound. "You always know," he murmured, stroking her fingers.

"I *am* a sensitive, Father. Now, why don't you sit down and tell me what's bothering you." There was no question of that. His usual pale yellow aura was ringed in muddy red and a touch of deep purple.

He stepped over the bench and sank down beside her, his posture stiff, seemingly discomfited by something.

"This isn't like you," she noted. Her father hadn't seemed so ill at ease since her mother died. *No. That's not true. The month following my eighteenth birthday, he was always on edge, much like this.*

"I know. I..." He rubbed a hand over his eyes, abruptly showing signs of fatigue.

She raised an eyebrow. Her father had never been this tongue-tied before.

"We received an invitation today," he informed her, sounding more like he was issuing an order than telling her about a social occasion.

"Really? Under any other circumstances, I'd say that was good news, but your reaction doesn't make that seem likely. Tell me about it."

He darkened, a flash of anger glowing in his aura. "It isn't my place to say whether this *invitation* is good news or not."

"Then, whose place is it?" she asked, honestly perplexed by that odd proclamation. It was obvious that her father wasn't happy about the situation, but he couldn't tell her why?

Patrick met her eyes, misery tearing through his expression.

"Mine?" she guessed.

"Yes. It is."

She hesitated, momentarily at a loss. "I don't understand. Who issued this invitation? Where are we supposed to be going? For what reason?"

"The invitation is from Mikel of Crossbearer-König."

"To go to America? I've never been there." A swirl of excitement circulated in her belly at the idea of seeing someplace new. What could be wrong with that?

He ground his teeth, *Blutjagd* shining white hot around him. "No, you haven't," he agreed.

She swallowed a sudden knot of apprehension. He felt there was some threat in this, but did she dare ask why? "Why has he called for us?" she asked.

"It seems the young Prince has decided to take a mate."

"Twenty-two is a bit young for that, I suppose, but what does it have to do with us?" A wild conjecture flirted at her mind, and she shoved it away in dogged disbelief.

"He wants to meet you."

Her head spun. “Meet me? Why does he want to meet me?” Surely, he didn’t think she’d agree to marry a man she’d never met.

“You are under no obligation—”

“You gave him permission?” she demanded. “Without consulting me?”

“Of course not! I would never encourage a man you didn’t want.”

“Then tell him I have no intentions of coming,” she asserted. “How dare he order me to come to him like some—like some mail-order bride!”

Her father stroked her cheek, smiling weakly. “I am ordered to bring you—”

“I won’t go.”

“Shhh,” he soothed her. “All you need do is walk in and tell him you have no interest. Then we can leave, and I will show you the sights of New York before we return home.”

Her breath caught at that. How long had she dreamed of seeing New York City? “Broadway?” she requested. “Central Park?”

“Grand Central Station. The opera. The ballet. You have my vow that I will take you anywhere and everywhere you wish.” His smile widened as it always did when he knew she would be pleased with a surprise.

“Very well,” she decided. “I will give the *Prince* his answer in person.”

\* \* \* \*

October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2048

Mikel sat in his office, trying desperately to calm his scattered nerves. Holly would arrive soon, and for the first time, he found himself doubting his perceptions. What if he'd been wrong all those years ago? What if Holly didn't want him?

He shook himself mentally. When had he ever been wrong? He wasn't wrong. Not about this. If his perceptions weren't proof enough, the maddening itch to see her was further evidence that there was more at work than a simple dream.

But, what if he'd called for her too soon? What if she wasn't prepared to accept him, yet? No. If that were the case, he wouldn't be half-mad for the three months he'd already wasted before he issued the invitation to Patrick of Schmeidt and his daughter.

A car pulled up out front, and Mikel turned his chair toward the window, forcing himself not to rush to it. She'd come to him. He knew she would. He'd known it twenty years ago, and nothing had changed in all that time.

The sounds of conversation moved closer, and he strained to hear them better. His heart stuttered at a female voice then settled as he recognized it as his mother's.

A knock came at the door.

"Come in," Mikel called out. He didn't turn around immediately, waiting for them to enter instead.

"Mikel?" his mother called.

He took a deep breath and turned to them, his eyes passing over the rigid Warrior he remembered and locking on Holly. She wasn't looking his direction.



Her eyes roamed his private shelves of books in awe.

She was petite, easily as tiny as his aunt Erin was. She wore a floor-length flowing peach gown that accented her dark features. It hugged her breasts and hips, flaring out to hide the rest of her form. Her dark curls reached her upper thighs and were restrained only by a gold clip at the nape of her neck. Errant curls escaped the clip and framed her face.

Mikel opened himself to her shimmer, praying it was as he remembered it. It was the vibrant blue of a young human sensitive with flecks of red—and better—gold and purple that marked his mate. He hadn't been wrong after all. He noted the red again. Her annoyance was something he could handle. If the rest of her shimmer was right, and it was, her anger would be overcome in time.

He stared at her, unable to look away. She was utterly captivating, and he hoped she found him the same.

Holly ran her fingertips over a leather-bound copy of Salem's Lot, biting her lip lightly. Her shimmer swirled with flecks of peach the color of her dress. He smiled. She wanted to read the books. They intrigued her.

"Signed by the author," he noted. "You may borrow any book you like."

Her face darkened, and she pulled her hand back, fisting it at her side. "I don't think so," she replied in a crisp, slightly cool voice, renewed annoyance making her shimmer fairly crackle with sparks of red and gold. She turned to him. "You see, I'm not—"

Holly broke off as she met his eyes. She gasped in

surprise, and the streaks of purple in her shimmer became dominant, drowning out every other color until it was nearly all Mikel could see.

“Staying,” she whispered.

Mikel raised an eyebrow, biting back a laugh. “Are you saying you won’t give me consideration?” he challenged.

\* \* \* \*

His aura was beautiful—nearly entirely lavender with a stunning halo of gold. But, it was more than that. The feeling that she knew him was unbelievably strong.

*It’s impossible, she reasoned. I’ve never been to America.*

Still, she couldn’t shake the feeling that she knew Mikel of Crossbearer-König. The surety was maddening in its intensity.

She panned her eyes over his upper body, her gaze settling on the dark hair peeking from the vee of his Hunter green button-down shirt. Not black like most Warriors wore, which made it new, interesting and appealing.

She would have liked to have claimed that it was the only remarkable thing about him—aside from his aura, but it wasn’t. His hair and eyes were, at first glance, the same as any Warrior-born possessed, the same as her own, but there was something deeper in Mikel, something that made her examine those features a second time, something she couldn’t name.

“Holly?” her father asked, his voice laced in

concern. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." Her voice sounded strange to her.

"Are you leaving me, Holly?" Mikel asked, his voice soft and inviting. "Are you refusing to consider me?"

Yes! But, her mouth wouldn't form the word.

Her heart ached. Her father stood in the edges of her peripheral vision, his body taut in anger, waiting for her to refuse Mikel. She should refuse him after the way he summoned her.

*Invited, some corner of her mind argued. He invited you, and you were only upset because of your father's reaction. Remember your excitement when you learned you'd been invited to America by Mikel?*

No. They'd been ordered to come. Her father said — He'd never lied to her before. Why would he now?

She started to speak, but her mouth refused the order again. It was one little word. Why couldn't she say it?

"Holly?" Mikel asked. "Are you refusing —"

"No," she breathed.

His smile was stunning, and his aura brightened.

"Are you certain you want to do this?" her father demanded. "If, at any time, you change your mind —"

"Certain," she agreed, nodding slowly.

Mikel bowed his head to her. "Then, I ask you, Patrick of Schmeidt, Warrior to Warrior, for the right to court your daughter with the intention of mating — if she chooses to accept me."

Her father glowed in *Blutjagd*. For a moment, she was certain he'd refuse Mikel's bid, and a hopeless

need to convince him gripped her.

He nodded, fisting his hand and speaking through the tension in his jaw. "If you truly wish this, I cannot stand in your way."

He could, and he wanted to, but he hadn't. Holly smiled her thanks, though some rational corner of her mind argued that she was mad to complicate her life this way. She had no intentions of mating with anyone, let alone a self-centered prince like Mikel.

It was his aura, she decided. There was something about his aura that she felt the need to examine.

"Perhaps we should leave them to talk," Lady Crossbearer suggested.

Her father shot a scathing look at Mikel then grumbled his agreement, touching her cheek before he stormed out the door.

An awkward silence fell in his wake. Holly clasped her hands and looked to the shelves again, seeking to escape Mikel's disconcerting gaze.

"Are you sure you don't want to read them?" he offered.

She scanned the titles, so many books her father didn't approve of. "You realize that some people may consider a *Soldat der Nacht* collecting vampire literature to be in poor taste," she informed him.

Holly peeked at him out of the corner of her eye, watching his smile widen and a swallowed laugh make his Adam's apple bob.

"You don't," he stated confidently.

She felt her face heat in embarrassment. *It is said he cannot be lied to.* She didn't answer him.

"If you wish to read them—"

"I do," she admitted. Her father had never permitted her to read vampire books, especially those that were horror.

She peeked at him again, wondering at his choice not to approach her. He had permission to pursue her. Why didn't he?

"Good. Then, please do."

"Why?" she asked, pulling out a book and staring at the cover intently, a vampire standing behind a woman holding a dagger.

"Perhaps we can discuss them. I would like to discuss them with you."

"No. I mean— Why did you ask for me?"

He didn't answer. Mikel seemed to consider her carefully.

"You don't know me," she insisted, unnerved by his silence. Why didn't he say something?

"Do you believe that?" The question seemed to cause him pain.

She wanted to scream an outraged "yes" at him, but she couldn't—again. The feeling that she knew him was too strong to ignore. Did he feel the same thing?

"We've never been formally introduced," he admitted, "but we have met."

"Have you come to Schmeidt?" she asked, searching her memories of visiting Warriors frantically for Mikel and coming to a blank wall.

"Never. With so few Crossbearers, there was never an opportunity for me to visit Europe."

"I've never been to America," she informed him. "So, we have not met."

He scowled. "You've been here. Your father simply never chose to tell you that you have, of course," he grumbled.

"Are you saying my father lied to me?" she demanded, furious at the insinuation.

"No. It was a convenient omission—one he no doubt felt would never be necessary to rectify."

"A lie! My father does not lie, Mikel."

He bowed his head to her, his eyes hard. He didn't even have the sense to apologize.

"I can see we have nothing to discuss," she snapped, storming into the hall and slamming the office door behind her.

Holly rushed down the hallway toward the rooms Lady Crossbearer had pointed out to her, her heart hammering, expecting Mikel to stop her at any second. She looked back as she reached the doorway to her assigned rooms then stared in disbelief. He hadn't followed her?

She pushed inside the room, her hands trembling. Nothing Mikel did made sense to her.

\* \* \* \*

"Holly?" Patrick asked. "What's wrong?"

His daughter's eyes shot to his. She stiffened then relaxed with a sigh, crossing the room to hug him, pressing a book to his spine.

"You're trembling," he noted, biting back fury. "What is it? Did Mikel—"

"He didn't touch me," she snapped at him, burying her face in his chest.

He took a calming breath. "Then, what?"

"I shouldn't have agreed. We should leave," she whispered miserably.

His head spun at her sudden changes of mood and decision. "Why *did* you agree?"

Holly shrugged. "He— Mikel confuses me. I don't— understand why— how..."

"Why are you shaking?"

"In anger, I assure you."

"What has he done?" *Prince or no, I will gut him if he's harmed her, if he's broken the rules of sanction in any way.*

She pushed away and started pacing the room, her arms crossed under her chest.

"Holly?" he prompted her.

"I have never *been* to America before," she grumbled.

Patrick winced. So, it had come to that.

"And he dared! Do you know he dared insinuate—  
"

"That you had and I'd lied," he managed, sick in the realization that, from some point of view, Mikel was telling her the truth, and he had lied to her for her entire life. He'd had to lie to her. Telling her the truth had been too dangerous.

She stopped pacing, staring into space. Just when he would have prompted her again, she spoke softly. "No. He— Mikel claimed it was an omission you felt you wouldn't have to correct."

"How gracious of him," Patrick noted in annoyance. Couldn't Mikel fight him fairly? Couldn't he just call him a liar and be done with it? Hating

Mikel would be easier if he wasn't making excuses for his adversaries.

"But, you would never..." Holly stopped speaking abruptly as she turned to him. Her expression melted into a look of horror. "Dear Gods! You didn't!"

"It was before you were born," he justified. "You were conceived during a visit—"

"Here?" She darkened at the thought.

Patrick ran a hand through his hair, nodding. "In this room, actually," he admitted.

Holly ambled to the bed, seemingly stunned. She sank to it, pressing the book to her chest. "Mikel— He said we met, but if that was my only visit..."

He rubbed the ache building in the base of his skull, grimacing at more than the pain. Why had he never told her? Because he'd feared she'd seek Mikel out in fascination? Damn the man!

"I don't understand," she pleaded.

"He knew you existed almost before I did— without even touching your mother. He knew you were female. He told us you were."

"And?" Her voice was tiny and uncertain.

"He claimed you as his own." Patrick fought the tension in his jaw at the memory of that moment, at the wild urge to kill a toddler for daring such a thing. "He had no right!"

"And so, you refused every request I made to visit America," she accused.

He nodded. "Yes. I did. I was afraid he would find a way to steal you away from me."

Holly glared at him. "You hid the truth from me," she informed him. "You lied to me...about myself."



She was abruptly miserable. "Just as Mikel said you had."

"Holly," he pleaded.

"Go away. I don't want to see you right now."

"Holly—"

"I'm not saying I've decided to become Mikel's mate, but it seems I've misjudged him. I've done him a disservice, and I owe him an apology—as soon as I decide how best to do that."

She looked to the book in her hand, touching the cover reverently. Patrick wanted to inquire what it was, but he left instead, fearing she'd rebuff him again.

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Holly looked up from her dinner, staring at the empty space at the Lord Crossbearer's left. She pushed her food around her plate, her stomach churning far too much to consider eating any of it.

"Where is Mikel?" she asked, expecting a cool response from the Lord and Lady for her appalling behavior.

Lady Crossbearer smiled. "He took dinner in his office tonight. He says he has work, but I suspect Mikel felt he was overwhelming you."

She nodded, though she knew the real reason he'd taken his meal in his office. She'd offended him and not had the good grace to apologize yet.

"Are you all right, Holly?" the Lord asked.

"Fine," she lied. "I'm just not very hungry tonight."

"Jet lag?" the Lady asked. "It is a six-hour difference for you."

Holly managed a weak smile. "I suppose so. I think I'll retire, if you don't mind."

"Of course. A good night's sleep should set you right."

She left the table, avoiding her father's eyes when she knew he wanted to catch her attention. She wandered up the stairs, pausing at the top. Her room beckoned, a safe haven from what she knew she *should* do. It would be so easy to go there and hide from her embarrassment.

*Except, I'll feel guilty until I offer the apology Mikel is due.* Holly sighed and turned right instead of left. She took a deep breath and knocked on his door.

"Come in, Holly."

She winced, opening the door and entering without meeting his eyes. He didn't speak. After a long moment of silence, she chanced a look at him.

Mikel stared at her, his expression unreadable. He twirled a pen between his fingers and leaned back in his chair. "Do we have something to discuss?" he asked evenly.

Holly felt her cheeks heat. He was taunting her with her own angry words. "I owe you an apology."

"You don't," he assured her.

She faltered. "I do. You were right. I asked my father directly. He never told me. I'm sorry that I—"

"You don't need to be."

"What?" Why did nothing about Mikel make sense?

He dropped the pen on the desk, laying his hands

on the arms of his chair. "You defended what you'd always been told was true. There's nothing to be sorry for. Of course, you assumed I was the one who was lying. You had no reason to believe me.

"I learned long ago that knowing something doesn't mean you should say it. Sometimes, I forget myself and speak without considering the consequences on those around me."

"Like you did when you pronounced I was yours all those years ago?"

He scowled, his face pinking slightly. His aura muddled a bit but with an indeterminate color that told her nothing of his feelings. "I was a toddler," he explained. "I hadn't reasoned what your father would make of my pronouncement."

"But, you still believe it." She didn't question it.

"Yes. I do. More than ever."

"Why me?"

"Why did you stay when you came prepared to blast me out of the water and leave?"

She gasped. "How could you know that?"

"Do your shimmers—your auras tell you anything?" he countered.

"Sometimes." But not nearly as much as she'd like with Mikel. She ambled to the sofa and sat. "Little things. Mainly the emotional state of the subject." She met his eyes. "I have heard..."

He raised an eyebrow. "What have you heard?"

"I have heard your auras tell you much more."

Mikel smiled. "Yes. They do."

"I have heard you cannot be lied to."

"Also true."

"And – that you see inside people's souls?"

"Ahhh. An excellent story. Would that it were so, but there are limits. Ethics are situational. Even I cannot foresee what might come. I am not a precognitive, after all. Shimmers tell a moment in time – and a general state of being. They cannot tell me more than that."

"What does my aura tell you?"

"The blue base tells me you are a human sensitive. Your identifiers tell me that you are headstrong, inquisitive, more relaxed than when you walked through the door..."

"And?"

"My mate," he offered simply. "If you choose to be."

Holly swallowed hard. "You don't know me," she protested. *I don't know you!*

"I intend to get to know you."

Her heart started pounding, the more carnal ways a Warrior could use to get to know a woman settling in her mind. Overall, it wasn't an unpleasant montage of images, though it was an exceedingly disconcerting experience.

"Not until you're ready for an intimate relationship," he vowed.

"And, if I never am?" Meeting his eyes suddenly seemed difficult.

He smiled, his eyes glittering in amusement that turned his aura a vivid rose.

She forced a breath, well aware that he knew precisely what she'd been thinking moments earlier. "Why did you skip dinner? Were you angry with

me?" she asked, seeking to change the subject.

"No. I wasn't angry with you. I knew you weren't ready to spend time with me yet." He sighed. "Forcing my company on you won't win your trust, Holly. You have to want to get to know me."

*That is why he doesn't approach.* "I would like to get to know you, Mikel." At least, she might discover why she found it hard to refuse him.

"That is the truth," he said in something resembling amazement. "Very well. May I make a suggestion?"

She motioned for him to continue. "Please."

"Read the book you borrowed and join me for a picnic lunch tomorrow. We'll discuss vampire literature—and perhaps ourselves."

"Agreed."

"Perhaps you would care to read more of my books, and we can meet to discuss them—if you care for my company."

Holly nodded, her heart beating fast in anticipation. "Well—I suppose I should read the book." She stood, smoothing her skirt and preparing to return to her rooms.

His smile dimmed somewhat, making her wonder if he was saddened by her departure. That seemed unlikely. How could she affect him so markedly in so short a time?

"Sleep well, Holly." His tone implied that he wished she'd sleep well in his arms.

She turned abruptly, heading for the door in a mixture of desire and confusion. "Until tomorrow, Mikel."

\* \* \* \*

Holly paused in her reading, placing the book on the bed beside her. She took a calming breath, the vision of the last paragraph burned into her mind. If all vampire books were like this one, it was no wonder her father had never let her read them. The simmering sensuality left her in a marked state of arousal.

Her stomach grumbled, reminding her of another need she'd been denying. She should have eaten dinner. Now she was uncertain whether she should go hungry or risk appearing a poor houseguest by raiding the kitchen when she hadn't been given leave to do so.

A knock came at the door.

"Come in," she announced automatically, half-expecting her father, bearing some gift in apology for the argument they'd had earlier.

Whoever it was didn't comply. She furrowed her brow, her senses telling her that someone stood outside the door but not who without a direct line of sight.

"Come in," she repeated.

Still, the person neither answered nor entered.

Holly pushed from the bed, straightening her robe and heading to the door. She hesitated as the person moved. He stopped in response, just after she did. She gasped. *Mikel!* It had to be Mikel. The only other person capable of this was the Lady Crossbearer, and Holly felt certain she wouldn't play such games.

For a moment, neither of them moved. Holly took a step, and Mikel mirrored her move. She rushed toward the door, determined to learn what his game was, grumbling an oath as he loped away. She wrenched the door open and looked toward his office.

Mikel stood two doors further down the hall, leaning against the frame as if in repose. His aura told another tale. It was the lavender she noticed first but ringed with the muddy red halo that indicated uncertainty. She stared at that, trying to discern why he would feel this way.

He motioned toward his feet, and she looked down.

There was a tray of food set against the wall. Holly stared at it in disbelief then looked to Mikel, intent on questioning him. He was gone, most likely into the door he'd been leaning against moments before.

She picked up the tray and carried it inside, her mouth watering. Mikel had made her a sandwich with a side of sliced fresh fruit, a salad and potato salad. Glasses of milk and apple juice rounded out the meal, and a single orchid, most likely from the greenhouse out back, graced a vase, adding just a touch of beauty to the arrangement.

Holly stilled as she set the tray on the desk against the far wall, a flash of color beneath the white linen napkin catching her eye. She pulled the folded piece of paper free and opened it. She read it twice, finally pressing it to her chest, the words circling in her mind until she felt dizzy.

*My home is yours. Mikel*

\* \* \* \*

October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2048

Mikel smiled, remembering the sweet torture of watching the arousal color her shimmer as she'd read the night before. He could have closed himself off to the experience, but there was something addictive in seeing her responses to what she read. He knew the book she chose intimately, of course. For a split-second, he'd almost suggested she choose another. He was glad that he hadn't.

"No, not every vampire book is so sensual," he assured her. "You simply chose one that was."

Her shimmer flickered with lights of forest green and peach, noting a hunger for more. He closed his eyes, the need to steer her toward more of the same beating at him. How long could he stand it? Not touching her was likely to drive him insane, especially knowing she possessed a fiercely sexual nature, but experiencing her pleasure, even in this vicarious manner, was too enjoyable to pass up.

She moved away slightly, shifting her legs under her, deep in thought based on the Navy blue flecks in her shimmer. "With literature such as that, it's no wonder a few women have refused the amulet and allowed themselves to be used again."

He opened his eyes, raising an eyebrow in surprise. "I wouldn't blame the books. I'm certain some beasts are practiced at making the experience pleasurable."



She scrunched up her nose in disgust. "Still, the idea of a beast retaining his kind emotions," she scoffed.

"Yes. I agree." *Though Erin swears Veriel did, it is wholly unbelievable.* "Have you noticed how many other facts the author got right, though?" The book had always been one of his favorites for that reason, and more than once this afternoon, he'd wondered if she chose it, because she felt his energies in it more strongly than the others.

"Yes. I did notice that. It was rather disconcerting," she admitted. "Do you think she's met a protected?"

"It's possible but unlikely. Our protected don't typically compromise us; fear of losing protection is a powerful thing, after all. No. With that storyline, the beast with kind emotions, it's more likely that her information came either from a beast or a willing human donor."

"Yes. I suppose so." She looked to the stream, lost in thought.

Mikel studied her profile, aching to run his fingertip along her lips. She was beautiful, and she would be his—if he let her come to him and didn't pressure her for more than she was willing to give.

"Do you believe someone can know his soulmate immediately?" she asked.

He stared at her, stunned that Holly had chosen that plot point to discuss with him so soon. "Yes. I do." *I have.*

She turned to him, her expression earnest. "Is that what it's like for you?"

"Very much," he admitted. Much more than he'd

like to admit sometimes, but he was not a beast, and he wouldn't resort to that. Though it might work as it had in the first story in the book, it could just as easily backfire as it had in the second. That was another reason he read that book often, as a cautionary tale to himself.

"Is it..."

He smiled at her hesitancy. "Yes?"

Her cheeks darkened to deep rose. "Is it difficult for you?"

He pretended not to understand what she was asking. "Difficult? Getting to know you is wonderful." At least, he hadn't lied.

"No. I mean... You never touch me. Is it difficult not to? If you are so certain—"

"Yes. It is hard not to, but I am not a beast. I vowed not to touch you until you were ready to be touched."

Holly laid back on the blanket and stared at the clouds. His eyes fastened on the lush lines of her chest beneath the Hunter green dress she'd worn for their picnic. Mikel dragged his gaze away, taking another calming breath.

"Is that what this is?" she asked suddenly.

"What would that be?" he asked.

"This strange reluctance I have to leaving you."

He stared at her, heartened that she admitted what she felt so easily.

"This sense of comfort in your company. This—" She met his eyes, running her fingertips over his knee.

Mikel shivered, his cock rising at her invitation. "You're asking me to touch you?" he managed.

Holly smiled smugly. "If what you believe is true,

shouldn't I feel it if you do?" she challenged.

He stretched out beside her, leaning up on his elbow so that he looked down on her. "It's more than that," he informed her. "You want me to kiss you."

She nodded, her eyes locked with his, breathless. "Yes."

"Yes."

Mikel planted his hand beside her head, lowering his face until his lips were brushing hers, intent on a long, slow seduction. She sighed, closing her lips on his lower lip, then his upper.

"More?" he rasped, holding himself in rigid control.

"Yes," she pleaded in a whisper, her eyes closing.

He kissed her more purposefully, his tongue flicking at her lips then delving inside when she parted them. The fire of their mixed shimmers shot up around them, drowning out his sense of the world outside of its borders. All that existed was Holly: her sweet scent, her soft skin, the sighs and moans that escaped her lips from kiss to kiss, the curves of her body pressed hard to his...

Mikel stilled, forcing his mind to function when it had no intention of doing so. He was over her fully, his cock cradled at the apex of her thighs, his hands fisted in her curls. Holly opened her eyes, slumberous eyes that begged for more, that begged for him to push her dress up and take her as the beast had taken his soulmate outside her father's gardens in the book she'd read.

*I am not a beast.*

He eased off of her, smoothing her hair and laying

a solemn kiss on her swollen lips.

She grasped at his shirt, her eyes wide in confusion. "Mikel—"

"Not this way," he managed. "When we do this, I'll know you want it. You won't regret it, and I won't take advantage."

"I don't..."

"We should go back to the house."

\* \* \* \*

**October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2048**

Holly tossed the book she was reading to the foot of the bed, moving restlessly. What was the point of reading when she couldn't even concentrate on the print?

It seemed Mikel was trying to drive her insane. In the week since their first picnic, they'd discussed a book a day—and shared heated loveplay. That very afternoon, she'd found herself laid over his desk, dragging her skirts up to facilitate his possession, his mouth ravenous against hers, his hand teasing at her breast through the bodice of her gown—and still he stopped, proclaiming that their first time wouldn't pass that way.

Every step seemed dependant on her to make the first move. She saw Mikel at meals, but after them, he would leave her with a bow of his head if she didn't follow and pursue more time with him. Other than that, he stayed to his private spaces almost exclusively—never approaching her own, only

coming to her if he'd asked for her company previously and meeting her in a common area of the house. While she was always welcome to enter his domain, he never ventured to her, never approached her personal space without an invitation to do so.

She couldn't stand the waiting anymore. If he didn't make love to her tonight, she would leave and not look back.

Holly let herself out into the hall and strode to the door Mikel had disappeared through when he'd left the tray for her, hoping it was his bedroom. She hesitated long enough to assure herself that someone was inside the room and wished again that she could see her auras through obstacles as Lady Crossbearer and Mikel could.

Should she knock? Holly decided against it and pushed the door open, entering and closing herself in. She didn't look up immediately, half-afraid that she'd intruded on the Lord and Lady's rooms.

"You wish to see me, Holly?" Mikel asked calmly, as if he'd expected her to walk into his room.

She bit back a laugh. He probably had expected it. This was the same man who'd brought her a meal when she was hungry, when he'd been nowhere near her to see her discomfort with his own eyes. She glanced up at him, her smile disappearing.

He sat up in bed, nude and semi-erect. Mikel made no move to cover himself. He seemed completely at ease with his nudity, completely comfortable with her bold perusal of him.

"Holly?" he reminded her.

She untied her robe and eased it off, letting it fall to

the floor around her ankles. Mikel sucked in his breath and his muscles tensed, but he offered no comment. His cock hardened, coming to rest against the flat plane below his navel. Encouraged, Holly pushed the straps of her nightgown off of her shoulders and let the silky material slide to the floor, watching it pool around her feet. She'd chosen what to wear carefully, the most alluring gown she owned with no underclothes beneath.

There was no movement or sound from the bed. She stepped out of the nightgown, chancing a look at him, half-afraid he'd turn her away again.

His eyes followed the line of her body from feet to face, slowly, hungrily. "You're coming to me willingly?" he asked. "You're willing to—consider at least, being my mate?"

"Yes. I am." Holly didn't give him a chance to dismiss her simply. She walked to the bed, sinking to the edge of the mattress with her legs folded under her.

Mikel wrapped his hands around her waist and drew her across his body until her head lay pillowed on his opposite shoulder and his arm supported her back. His breathing hitched, and he closed his eyes as if seeking control—or praying.

His mouth closed on hers, not in the mindless passion they'd shared for the last week but in patient exploration. His hands roamed her body, mapping every curve until she felt faint in anticipation. When she arched to him for more, his movements became more purposeful though no more hurried, teasing her breasts to aching points then her clit. She was

moaning into his mouth, wet and aching before he eased her to the bed and rolled her to her side against his chest.

"You came to me," he breathed in something resembling awe, as if it was significant that she'd pursued this step with him. "You want me."

Holly nodded, tracing the blood mark over his ribs. How could he question that she'd want him? This was Mikel of Crossbearer, a König prince. He was powerful—both as a sensitive/psychic and a Soldat der Nacht. He'd killed the final elder, Lorian, at only four years of age. He was handsome, intelligent, thoughtful, had a wonderful sense of humor—

"And?" he asked, nearly begged of her.

"I love you," she breathed.

Mikel groaned. He recited a verse in the ancient language of the stone.

She furrowed her brow in confusion at that.

"You are my life," he translated. "I would shed my blood or give my life for you without thought of my duty to do so."

Holly gasped in surprise. "The ancient joining ceremony."

There was no mistaking those words. She'd always thought they were beautiful, a wonderful testament to the commitment a Warrior had for his sealed mate. If Mikel made this vow to her, he must be very close to Ende Spiel and serious about printing. Considering that, it was amazing that he'd been able to refuse her this long.

He nodded. "Will you be mine?"

She leaned her head down, planting her lips over

his blood mark. Mikel groaned again, his hands grasping handfuls of her hair lightly.

"Make me yours, Mikel. I will be bound." It was a huge step, one that could never be undone. Still, Holly didn't question that it was the right choice.

He guided her mouth back to his, his kiss less restrained. "You will never regret this," he promised.

"I know." If he sealed to her, he would be unable to cause her discomfort without reason to do so. Even then, her displeasure would be acutely uncomfortable for him.

They seemed to leave their slow exploration behind in a heartbeat. Her body ached and burned for him. She arched her back, laboring for breath as Mikel trailed his mouth from her lips, down her throat and to her breasts, lathing and sucking at her.

Holly moaned, awash in the intensity of the sensations. She'd felt his hands there several times, but his mouth was a thousand times better, much more so than she'd anticipated. Her core was more than ready, throbbing in a cadence she wanted him to match. Mikel would find that rhythm. She knew he would. She grasped at his shoulders, tugging him over her, begging silently for him to end the torment she'd been in for the previous week.

His body covered hers, turning her beneath him as he rose up over her and captured her mouth in a near bruising kiss. She spread for him, gasping as his cock brushed against her aching center.

Mikel pulled back slightly, panting, trembling, seemingly at the edges of restraint. "Are you sure? I can be slow."



She nodded frantically. If he made her wait much longer, she'd surely cry for wanting more.

He thrust into her, his ragged cry mixing with her scream of pleasure. There was discomfort, but it only seemed to give the pleasure a keener edge. He remained motionless, while her body adjusted to his length filling her, stretching her, and making the ache for him increase. The throbbing returned, more urgent and insistent.

"Oh, yes," he breathed, his eyes glazed in need.

His hips rolled smoothly, cycling faster and faster until they matched the cadence her body set. Holly rose to meet him, whimpering and panting in her rapid rise.

Mikel murmured endearments, oaths to several of the ancient gods, and finally, "You are mine."

Her body was abruptly swamped in waves of delight that she suspected he'd seen coming before she had. Mikel thrust deep, his body pistoning in hers as his seed pulsed into her, caressing her with his heat. Her sharp cry of surprise was swallowed by his roar of climax, in the claiming of a mate.

His lavender aura blazed up around them, turning flame blue then settling on a bright gold. Holly raised her hand, looking at the precious metallic glow in awe. She sought out Mikel's eyes, struggling for words.

"You are a König now," he soothed her.

She nodded solemnly. She'd asked to be his, but she'd never expected so outward a sign of it.

He met her lips, a heated exchange that soon spiraled out of control. Holly smiled as his erection

came to life within her again.

"What is it?" he asked, a lazy smile curving his lips.

"If we continue this way, my father won't have to be told that I've accepted you."

Mikel chuckled. "Your scream when I entered you has announced that clearly, and my cry at the seal alerted the entire household." He blushed, pressing deep into her and groaning in response. "I could apologize, but I refuse to apologize that our first time was so enjoyable."

She arched against him. "Hmmm... Perhaps, we should change rooms," she suggested.

He scowled, looking around at his room critically. "There's something wrong with my room?" he asked, seemingly concerned at the thought. "Granted, it needs your touch, but..."

Holly nipped at his chin, forcing his attention back to her. "A silly wish," she whispered.

"What wish? I would give you almost anything. You know that." His fingers laced through hers, and his hips slid slowly against her, pushing them both toward another release.

"My father said I was conceived here—in the room you assigned me to." She felt her cheeks heat as he looked up with a purely male smile of satisfaction. "Yes. I figured out that must have been your doing nearly the moment he told me what the room's significance was."

Mikel chuckled. "If you wish to make love there, we will, but I know something your father overlooked."

"What's that?" she asked.

"You were conceived in that room, but you were conceived in this bed. I claimed it as my own long ago."

"As you claimed me." Somehow, that seemed appropriate.

He raised an eyebrow at that, and she nodded in understanding. She'd had the choice to be here or not.

"And I came to you," she finished aloud.

"Yes. You did."

## About The Author

Brenna Lyons lives in Haverhill, MA with her husband, three children, and a zoo of pets. She was born and raised in the Hazelwood/Glenwood area of Pittsburgh, PA and toured the east coast as a Navy wife for thirteen years.

She enjoys the Society for Creative Anachronism and is a member of such groups as Broad Universe, EPIC, WRW and ERA.

Brenna holds a BS in Accounting and a Certificate of Computer Programming. Why? An auditing teacher commented that she would either "make the perfect auditor or the perfect thief," and she had been writing for eleven years with little professional training—in effect, a thief of attention by misdirection.

Never one to pass up a challenge, Brenna has worked as an auditor, tracking down fraud suspects, finding the backdoors into exchange computer systems, creating accounting programs for government and small businesses, and as a writer. Overall, it's the best of both worlds.

Brenna enjoys talking to readers and can be reached via her site at <http://www.brennalyons.com>